

How post-Civil War segregation helped to shape the patterns of racial inequality that we see today.

In the wake of recent tragic killings of blacks by whites in Ferguson, Baltimore, and Charleston, the issue of black-white segregation has come to the fore once again. In new research [Angelina Grigoryeva](#) and [Martin Ruef](#) examine the history of segregation in the aftermath of the Civil War. They find that in the North, as today, segregation was largely in the form of racialized African-American districts, while in the South, segregation was more fine-grained with black families relegated to side streets and alleys in more mixed communities, reproducing the racial inequality found under slavery. They write that examining early forms of racial segregation and how they varied by region may be useful in explaining regional differences in racial unrest in the contemporary United States.



Recent incidents of violence against blacks in American cities, including Ferguson (Missouri), Baltimore (Maryland), and Charleston (South Carolina), have once again thrown the issue of black-white segregation into sharp relief. But when and where did the intensive pattern of racial separation originate in the United States? Analyzing the 1880 complete count census data for a large sample of cities, we provide the first systematic empirical evidence on historical patterns of racial residential segregation. Contrary to the consensus interpretation that “[there was a time, before 1900, when blacks and whites lived side by side in American cities](#)”, our findings suggest that even in the aftermath of the post-Civil War Reconstruction, and prior to the Great Migration, cities across the country already witnessed widespread segregation.



Segregation took various forms across the postbellum United States, with important regional differences between the Northeast and South. In the American Northeast, segregation largely assumed the form of racialized African-American districts, similar to those today. By contrast, the South developed a fine-grained pattern of segregation, which took place at a smaller spatial scale than in the Northeast. In southern cities, white families dominated front streets, whereas black servants or tenants were relegated to living on smaller streets and alleys, in the rear of affluent white families’ homes. This pattern of segregation has been referred to as the “backyard” pattern. Rooted in the legacy of slavery, the backyard pattern could be traced to the time when blacks who were engaged as slaves or servants lived in close proximity to the whites who owned or employed them. Although blacks and whites in the postbellum South lived in reasonably close spatial proximity, physical barriers and street layout served to preserve social distance between these racial groups. In northern cities, blacks were clustered in different areas of the city from whites, whereas in southern cities blacks were relegated to living on different streets than whites but within the same districts.

Much of the regional divergence between the cities of the South and the Northeast was accounted for by structural differences, including the prevalence of the black population, its occupational structure, and a city’s historical experiences with slavery. Street-level segregation was more likely to be observed in cities where blacks represented a larger proportion of the urban population and where blacks worked in occupations that brought them into regular contact with white employers, such as domestic service. By contrast, blacks were more likely to be segregated via racialized neighborhoods in younger cities, cities where more time had passed since the abolition of slavery, and cities where blacks represented a smaller share of the population. Thus, street-front segregation in the South reproduced the racial inequality found under slavery, while segregation through racialized districts in the North substituted residential inequality for the status inequality of slavery.



"Segregation 1938b" by John Vachon for U.S. Farm Security Administration – Library of Congress[1]. Licensed under Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons.

To capture the more fine-grained pattern of segregation along street networks, we have developed a sequence-based measure of segregation. Because households adjacent in census listings were neighboring due to enumeration procedures, the measure is based on the ordering of households in census population listings. Specifically, it tests whether racial sequences in the population listings are serially independent—that is, it compares the observed degree of interspersal between whites and blacks to what would be expected if whites and blacks were alternated randomly.

This method offers an opportunity to extend the time frame and geographic coverage of existing studies of racial segregation. Most studies that focus on trends in segregation adopt relatively short observation windows and begin close to the present. However, this narrow chronological focus misses the historical origins of segregation, which may have important implications for its current levels and forms. By using census enumeration procedures, our measure incorporates detailed spatial relations between housing units without recourse to household addresses or historical maps of urban centers.

Our findings become more consequential as the outcomes of segregation are considered. A focus on historical patterns of racial residential segregation is especially informative for understanding black socioeconomic mobility and the evolution of race relations over the twentieth century, with potential implications for racial inequality in the modern United States. The patterns of incorporation of blacks in the geographic structure of U.S. cities [have profound consequences](#) for black socioeconomic advancement. Historically, segregation has had implications for other forms of social control and subordination, including incarceration and physical violence. Yet distinct forms of segregation may affect upward or downward mobility in very different ways. For instance, racially segregated enclaves in northern cities [became a catalyst for black entrepreneurship in the 1920s and 1930s](#). It is unclear whether earlier street-front segregation in the American South could have produced the same outcome, given the economic subordination of blacks to spatially proximate white households within this residential pattern.

Our study suggests that looking at the early forms of racial segregation and how they varied by region may be useful in explaining regional differences in racial unrest in the contemporary United States. Future research can extend this work by documenting the effect of residential segregation between racial majorities and minorities in different historical contexts and different countries.

This article is based on the paper, 'The Historical Demography of Racial Segregation', in the American Sociological Review.

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